The Organ of Interruption: Optics and Perception in Beckett

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation
with research distinction in English in the undergraduate colleges
of The Ohio State University

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June 2008

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In the Beckettian universe, perception is divided into two distinct realms, one of being seen by others, and one of seeing oneself. As humans, both types of perception are necessary for survival. Beckett's philosophy is, above all, grounded in the belief that identity is essential to existence. Beckett's fixation with the human is materialized in his use of the body as the medium through which such interactions are achieved.

Physicality of the Eyes

Beckett commonly uses the eyes as a physical manifestation of the acts of seeing others and needing to be seen. Characters perceive one another through vision and connect by means of eye contact. The eyes as physical structures are also relevant in that they become outward manifestations of characters' psyches. In directing his own production of *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett explained to actor Rick Cluchey, "The eye is the organ of interruption between light and dark" (*Workbook,* 134). In other words, the eye mediates the light of the exterior world and internal darkness. In the play *Endgame,* Hamm is described as covering his face with a blood-smeared handkerchief. It becomes clear that Hamm's eyes are, in fact, bleeding. All of the turmoil, insecurity, and frustration that Hamm holds inside of him literally oozes out of his eyeballs. This image functions on two levels: it both expresses Hamm's mental state and contributes to the tone of surreal despair that permeates the play.

This boundary between the internal mind and the external world is also breached in Beckett's novel entitled *The Unnamable*. Here, the narrator searches for a sense of identity after disassociating himself from the "Murphys,

Molloys and Malones" he had previously employed to define himself (*Three Novels,* 303). Without masking himself in other identities, the narrator struggles to find how he is situated in the world. This speaks to both the need for human contact and the necessity of self-perception. Without others to serve as at least a point of reference, the narrator is lost; however, he is finally coming into his own and accepting that he needs to have an understanding of himself in order to exist. While this acknowledgement acts as a point of departure from which the narrator can establish a more solid sense of identity, his thinking is characterized by conflict and instability. Self-perception, then, is portrayed as both inevitable and impossible; it seems essential that the narrator wage this personal battle, but it is evident that there will be no final moment of self-actualization or clarity to act as a reward for this journey. The establishment of a sense of identity, however unattainable, is more an issue of survival than of fulfillment.

This internal struggle becomes externalized as the narrator reveals, "I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly" (*Three Novels,* 304). The tears that the narrator describes are a constant physical manifestation of his inner turmoil. Even though he claims to be focusing solely on himself, his emotional state is being exposed to the outside world. The effect is a reinforcement of the driving need to be perceived by others. Even against his will, the narrator, who has virtually no self-concept, is engaging in the human action of crying, by which others could gain some knowledge of him. As he describes his tears, the narrator specifies that he is "featureless, but for the eyes, of which only sockets remain" (*Three Novels,*

305). This shifting description is fitting; in refusing to bow to the perceptions of other people, he is left with few reference points by which to define himself at all, resulting in his description of how his body is situated in space. His propensity for telling stories, including those about Murphy, Molloy, and Malone, is part of what defines him as a person. In rejecting that, he is relinquishing some of his identity and, by extension, his humanity, rendering himself featureless.

Interaction and Eye Contact in *Krapp* and *Murphy*

In Beckettian philosophy, human interaction is portrayed as a necessity of existence. In the play *Krapp's Last Tape*, this is accomplished through the memory of eye contact. The elder Krapp listens to a tape in which a younger version of himself reminisces about an afternoon spent with a woman in a rowboat. He asks her to look at him, imploring, "Let me in" (*Krapp,* 22). Through this moment of eye contact, there is a communion of sorts, the implication being that the internal worlds of two people can be breached, and in doing so, fulfillment can be attained. As an old man, Krapp repeatedly listens to this part of the tape, reliving the brief connection he once experienced with another person. In a play characterized by futile rituals and geriatric grumblings, this is the single moment when Krapp seems truly satisfied: when he is reliving the most significant event of his life. He lingers over this episode in which he finds himself let into another human being's consciousness with longing and a sense of regret. It is clear that Krapp suppressed his yearning for companionship as he aged, leaving him essentially alone with his drawers full of objects and boxes of tapes. The traditional form of interpersonal interaction is replaced by a system in which

Krapp at age sixty-nine perceives younger versions of himself. In this manner, Krapp replaces contact with others with a relationship with himself. Listening to these tapes becomes a form of masturbation in which Krapp fantasizes about making an intimate connection with another person, but really only encounters himself, albeit at a different stage in his life.

A similar conception of the necessity of interaction is depicted in *Murphy*. The title character attempts to forge a relationship with Mr. Endon, whose mental condition prevents him from seeing and interacting with the world. For Murphy, who habitually paralyzes his body to sharpen his mind, Mr. Endon represents an ideal: a man who exists solely within himself. As the Malraux quotation that serves as an epigraph to Chapter 9 suggests, “Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens” (*Murphy,* 156). Implicit in this statement is the sense that even those living outside the world are naturally compelled to seek human contact.

Murphy acts on this urge when engaging in a game of chess with Endon during an overnight shift at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, where he is a nurse and Endon is a patient. As the game progresses, Endon plays entirely within himself, moving the pieces around the board in a circular, symmetrical pattern. Consequently, Murphy first imitates Endon then purposely tries to lose to him in a desperate attempt to draw his attention. As he is persistently ignored, the narrator relates that “Murphy began to see nothing” (*Murphy,* 246). Because he is not being perceived by another person, Murphy loses the ability to perceive himself. He cannot exist without the contact of another human being and begins

to evaporate as he is released from the physical world, escaping into the domain of the mind for which he longs.

Murphy's final encounter with Endon entails kneeling next to the man's bed and examining his eyes. He finds himself mirrored in the cornea, a distorted image on an unseeing orb. Staring at a reflection of himself not being perceived leads to what the text portrays as Murphy's liberation. He becomes "a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen" and escapes completely into the dark chaos of the mind, culminating in his death in a fire caused by gas (*Murphy,* 250). Here, the need to be perceived by others and the inevitable act of seeing oneself have a causal relationship: the lack of the former leads to Murphy's complete submersion in the latter.

Although both Murphy and Krapp experience a lack of connection with other people, their reactions are opposite: Murphy's retreat into the mind is the antithesis of Krapp's submersion in the physical. Where Murphy is, in a sense, released from the confines of the body, there is a pervasive feeling of restriction in *Krapp's Last Tape*. This is most evident in the corporeality of the eponymous character who is, in fact, named after a bodily function. The script references his chronic constipation, a detail that highlights his physicality but also reflects his mental state: he is emotionally detached from the present world, stuck in a cycle of rehashing a past that, aside from one privileged moment, provides little relief. The effect of the characters' detachment from others is reflected in the portrayal of death. This provides Murphy with a release from the restrictions of the body

into the intellect, whereas it offers Krapp little more than an end to the misery of life.

Blindness in *Godot*

In his plays, Beckett presents a stripped-down version of existence that verges on the surreal. In doing so, he creates characters that operate within social constructs that, though ambiguous, shape their understandings of both themselves and of others. One element that affects how they understand those constructs is time, a feature that acts as a filter through which characters experience the events of the play. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo's perception of time is altered by blindness. The affliction results in a sense of disconnect from the world and from himself, denying him the relief from the promise of an end to his misery and amplifying the suffering caused by the excruciating deteriorating repetition of the play while simultaneously elevating him to a more sophisticated level of philosophical thinking.

Without time to act as an anchor in reality, Pozzo loses his concept of society and of himself in the second act of the play. He suffers from both memory loss and a disruption of habit, which make themselves evident when Vladimir questions him about when he had been stricken with blindness. His heated response expresses the confusion and frustration caused by the loss of his sight: "One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?" (*Godot,* 103). Pozzo's perception is so drastically altered by his lack of vision

that his sense of time is collapsed. He condenses the human experience into one miserable instant: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (*Godot,* 103). Essentially cut off from even the most basic of social norms, he finds himself adrift; as Lucky claims in his convoluted speech, “The dead loss is the same” (*Godot,* 47).

The Pozzo that appears in the second act is drastically different from that which appears in the first. Originally, he presents himself as a stage actor of sorts, desperate for the approval of other human beings even as he masks his insecurities with an air of superiority. His need for recognition extends to sources as lowly as he considers Vladimir and Estragon to be. He goes so far as to present a monologue and solicit their opinions, explaining, “I have such need of encouragement!” (*Godot,* 39). The Pozzo that appears in the second act, however, is stripped of not only his vision, but his ability to function on the same social level, however dysfunctional, as he did previously. He is reduced to begging for help, and is so reluctant to speak that Estragon impatiently urges him to “Expand! Expand!” (*Godot,* 99).

If eyes signify seeing others and being perceived in return, we can also consider blindness in Beckett as a negative state that disrupts the balance between the observer and the observed. This is apparent in the progression of the interactions between Pozzo, Vladimir, and Estragon. In the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo imperiously examines Vladimir and Estragon through his glasses, recognizing them as human beings but asserting his superiority. He laughs in disbelief: “Of the same species as Pozzo! Made in God’s image!”

(*Godot,* 19). Although Pozzo acknowledges the men, he disdains associating with such people. Like his eyesight, Pozzo's thinking is myopic; although he has a higher social status than Vladimir and Estragon, the two provide the interaction that is necessary for his survival.

When Pozzo reappears in the second half of the play, his situation has worsened. This seems a confirmation of the sentiment expressed in his earlier comment regarding his pipe: "The second is never so sweet" (*Godot,* 27). Indeed, in *Waiting for Godot*, the second act is a more intolerable version of the first, including Pozzo's newfound loss of sight. While he feels the need to emotionally connect to Vladimir and Estragon in the first act, he relies on them to physically rescue him and pull him to his feet in the second. His blindness has robbed him of nearly every anchor to reality and society; this not only disorients him psychologically but physically as well.

In communicating with Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo's frustration from being excluded from society manifests itself in a series of outbursts. Although they are impassioned and desperate, they also elevate him almost to the status of prophet. A far cry from his vaudevillian attempts to get Vladimir and Estragon to invite him to sit on his own stool, Pozzo's monologue in Act Two seems both more reasoned and more philosophical. In a way, he becomes more psychologically stable as his senses are dulled. Although it is not quite the Act Two equivalent of Lucky's famous monologue, it is an example of a clearly reasoned, though disturbing, speech that contrasts sharply from the convoluted, pseudo-sociological piece delivered by Lucky.

The tragedy, then, of Pozzo's blindness is present not only in his debilitation but in his newfound profundity. His shame over his ruined state is expressed through his sublime pessimism, conditioned by his isolation from even society he once considered inferior. His feelings of disconnection ravage his memory to the point that he decides that memories themselves are useless. He clings to the barest of his old habits, but only enough to further the cyclical decline of the play. The result is a production in which time offers no comfort or promise of the end, but only of a repetitive degeneration that, unlike the spear of Telephus[1], neither heals nor wounds, but causes eternal decay.

Blindness in *Endgame*

Hamm is saddled with the burden of life without sight in *Endgame*. While the unseeing Endon exists solely within his own mind, Hamm can only survive by relying on Clov to act as his eyes. Here, seeing is linked to a sense of agency: the men's relationship is held together by a complex power dynamic in which Hamm acts as master, but is dependent on Clov's perceptions. This is reminiscent of the moment in *Waiting for Godot* when Pozzo needs Vladimir and Estragon to describe their surroundings. In one of their exchanges, Hamm taunts Clov with a description of blindness, promising that he too will reach this state of unseeing. To Hamm, the loss of sight is tantamount to a loss of significance. He rants, "Infinite darkness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't be enough to fill it, and there you'll be

[1] In introducing his discussion of time in his essay on Proust, Beckett comments, "In Proust each spear may be a spear of Telephus." (*Grove Centenary*, v.4 p.511)

like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe" (*Endgame,* 36). Finding his ability to perceive hindered, Hamm loses his sense of purpose and identity. He cannot experience the reciprocity of perception, a loss that results in an overwhelming sense of isolation. This partly explains why he feels that he needs to endlessly dictate instructions to Clov in hopes of finding a human connection despite his lack of vision.

This quest for companionship explains Hamm's preoccupation with the toy dog. Hamm is so compelled to be perceived by others that he repeatedly questions Clov for details about the actions of an inanimate object. He asks, "Is it gazing at me?... As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?... Or as if he were begging me for a bone. Leave him like that, standing there imploring me" (*Endgame,* 41). Much like with his interactions with Clov, Hamm seeks to establish dominance over the dog. He seems to compensate for his blindness by asserting power, first over Clov then over the toy dog. Part of his definition of himself depends upon his role as master. This conception is complicated by the reality of the characters' situations. A feeling of stasis pervades the play as both Hamm and Clov seem simultaneously dependant upon their relationship with one another and incapable of escaping its cyclical futility.

The Windows to the Mind

In some works, the physical structures of the eyes are symbolized by the presence of windows. In this manner, the concept of seeing is also present in *Endgame* in the construction of the set. The two windows on the back wall function as eyes; the play is, in fact, one that takes place in the space of the

mind. It is through the windows that Clov can see the Earth and the sky; they facilitate the passage between the inner world of the play and the external unknown. In this interpretation of the play, Hamm and Clov become dual images of the self that are hostile toward one another, but are each necessary for the other's survival. In "A Note on Perception and Communication in Beckett's *Endgame*," Allan Brick suggests that Hamm and Clov might simultaneously represent two distinct human beings and two facets of the self. He concludes, "The process of perception by which man asserts—or as Beckett seems to insist, fails to assert—his individuality is the same within selves as it is between selves" (Brick, 22). In *Endgame*, these internal and external struggles are inextricable; the characters rely on one another to furnish definitions of their own identities even as they experience the frustration of failing to establish a functional sense of self.

The analogy of windows and eyes reappears in *Rockaby*. As the nameless woman stares out of her "only window/ facing other windows/ other only windows/ all blinds down/ never one up," there is a sense of longing and desperation (*Shorter Plays,* 278). This is intensified by the repetition of the lines, creating a rhythm that morphs into a dirge. The woman fantasizes about breaching the internal world of the self and the external world of companionship, imagining herself peering out of the window to find "one blind up/ another creature there/ somewhere there/ behind the pane/ another living soul/ one other living soul" (*Shorter Plays,* 279). This possibility of contact with humanity is both sustaining and agonizing: while a sense of hope is offered by human connection,

the impossibility of such an encounter within the world of the play is tragic. This is a departure from *Endgame*, where Clov's telescope is aimed at the Earth but reveals nothing but "gray" (*Endgame,* 31). The absence of the hope of any sort of union with the outside world leaves the characters continually restricted to the space of the room, endowing the scene with a sense of futility.

In *Rockaby*, the metaphor of windows serving as eyes is furthered as the woman longs to find "behind the pane/ famished eyes/ like hers" (*Shorter Plays,* 279). As she explores her loneliness, the recurring image of hope is that of connection with another person, expressed through eye contact. The pane in the window becomes the pain in the eyes; the woman imagines that sharing the pain could somehow lessen it. The implication is that the fundamental connection between humans occurs because of an identification of oneself in the other person. Here, the basis of that identification is suffering. Even the relief of human interaction is facilitated, paradoxically, by a shared sense of loneliness and isolation.

Towards the end of the play, the woman succumbs to her detachment from the world and fades away. The sign of her surrender is the closing of the blinds, cutting her off from the perception of the world and allowing her to withdraw into her rocking chair. The play decrescendos as the woman rejects the fundamental need for others. She retreats entirely into herself, sinking into ether in a manner reminiscent of Murphy. In Beckett, such descents are characterized by the total submersion into the self; however, while this culminates in death in *Murphy*, it is more ambiguous in *Rockaby*. She appears to

die, but more accurately, she ceases to exist as a recognizable human being. Her desperate curse, “stop her eyes/ fuck life/ stop her eyes,” shows her rejection of an isolated life (*Shorter Plays,* 282). If her eyes cannot serve their purpose and allow for some sort of communication with another, they might as well “stop” and release her from the misery of her existence. Whether her decline ends in death, madness, or some undefined state of non-being, it is contingent upon her relinquishment of the natural desire for human interaction.

Performance and Reaction

At the opposite end of the spectrum from sinking into the mind is performing to gain the notice of others. Again, Pozzo and Hamm parallel one another in their propensity to perform for characters that they consider subordinate, but obviously are reliant upon for human interaction. In *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo recites a monologue for Vladimir and Estragon, slipping his performance into the course of their discussion. When the men continue as if it was merely part of the conversation, Pozzo draws attention to it, asking, “How did you find me? …Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?” (*Godot,* 39). The need for approval or at least recognition from another person overwhelms Pozzo’s sense of pride; in asking Vladimir and Estragon for their opinions, he is endowing them with the power to criticize him. In doing so, he is acknowledging them as people, despite his initial hesitation to recognize them as members of his own human race. In a sense, through validating them, he is validating himself.

This concept of validation goes beyond the mere seeking of approval; it becomes an affirmation of existence. Although Vladimir and Estragon respond

politely to Pozzo soliciting their feedback, how they react to his performance seems less important than the fact that they react at all. As discussed earlier, Pozzo even acknowledges this compulsion for seeking recognition, exclaiming, “I have such need of encouragement!” (*Godot,* 39). Pozzo’s concept of himself is reliant on the perception of others. Although his tone is ostensibly patronizing, in implicating Vladimir and Estragon in this process is tantamount to elevating them to the status of peers; he is accepting them as worthy of interaction and, by extension, allowing himself to benefit from their relationship. Whether or not he realizes it consciously, their interactions endow him with a purpose. Because he recognizes them as fellow humans, he affirms his own identity and, by extension, his own existence.

A similar use of performance to elicit attention is present in *Endgame*. Hamm promises Nagg a sugar-plum in return for listening to him tell a story. What follows is a disjointed narrative that appears to be more for the benefit of Hamm than of Nagg. This moment in the play seems to be self-gratifying; Hamm is using storytelling as a mechanism to interact with another human being, but does so solely for his personal gain. He is not seeking to engage in a complex exchange with Nagg, but is using him as an instrument for confirming his own existence. Here, Nagg is in the same position as a member of the audience; Hamm alludes to him and acknowledges existence, but he is unable to contribute. Still, without him, Hamm would have no reason to perform his monologue, just as without the audience the play would be meaningless. In

short, Nagg's presence is necessary for Hamm to have a purpose and therefore to exist.

Sightless Perception

In some cases, especially those in which sight is limited or missing, the interplay of perceiving and being perceived must be facilitated by other means. In *Endgame*, this occurs primarily through verbal interaction between Hamm and the other characters, most notably Clov. As discussed earlier, Hamm relies on Clov to act as his proxy in perceiving the world through sight. However, Hamm also needs the reassurance of a human voice.

Much of the dialogue of the play takes the form of questions and answers. This serves a practical purpose in that Hamm is blind and must ask about the world around him; however, it also serves as a way to ensure that he is being perceived by another individual. In a sense, this operates in the same way as echolocation. In order to perceive himself being perceived by Clov, Hamm emits sound waves in the form of questions and hears them returned in Clov's reply. For example, when Hamm fantasizes about leaving the house and Clov acts as if he is leaving, Hamm delays him by asking a succession of questions: "Wait! Will there be sharks, do you think?... Wait! Is it not yet time for my pain-killer?... Wait! How are your eyes?... How are your legs?" (*Endgame,* 35). Clov provides the appropriate responses, and the play continues in its accustomed banal, circular fashion.

The recurrence of such conversations suggest a crystallized pattern of perpetual habit; Clov bemoans, "All life long the same questions, the same

answers" (*Endgame,* 5). The back-and-forth exchanges have become integral to how Clov perceives Hamm, and how Hamm perceives Clov and the rest of the world. In the painful stasis of a play that takes place in a closed system with only an unwanted deterioration into decay and death, Beckett presents two characters that only interact by means of repetitive dialogue that discusses nothing. In his essay on Proust, Beckett explains:

> The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty, whether through negligence or inefficiency, and boredom its adequate performance. (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.520)

The interplay of question and answer, stichomythic conversations, and weary monologues show the characters plagued by boredom so sharp that it has become a form of suffering; imprisoned in a closed system in a declining state, Hamm and Clov cling to these verbal habits. They adapt to the interminable deterioration by perpetuating the same form of interaction that they have always used. Hamm must speak and Clov must respond in order to perceive and be perceived by one another.

The characters seem to understand this dynamic; although Hamm takes the position of dictator, his subjects know his vulnerability. In response to his abuse (here, the absence of a promised sugar plum), Nagg curses Hamm: "I hope the day will come when you'll really need to have me listen to you, and

need to hear my voice, any voice" (*Endgame,* 56). When the oppressed Nagg imagines the most torturous retribution for Hamm's evils, he envisions him alone, crying out with no one to answer. Without anyone to connect him to the world, Hamm would be adrift in his blindness.

At the end of the play, Hamm's inability to perceive by means other than verbal communication leaves him incapacitated as Clov is standing by the door. Although he is present until the curtain falls, Clov refuses to acknowledge Hamm's speech or ever-present whistle. The pathos of the situation comes from Hamm's uncertainty about, and finally acceptance of, Clov's departure. He tries to entertain himself with a monologue, as he had suffered the other characters to do so many times before, finally surrendering and hesitatingly whistling for Clov. Whether or not he does so consciously, Hamm is admitting his need for companionship.

In fulfillment of Nagg's prediction, Hamm calls out, "Father! (*Pause. Louder.*) Father! (*Pause*.) Good. (*Pause.*) We're coming. (*Pause.*) And to end up with? (*Pause.*) Discard. (*He throws away the dog. He tears the whistle from his neck*.) With my compliments. (*He throws he whistle towards the auditorium. Pause. He sniffs. Soft*.) Clov!" (*Endgame,* 84). As Hamm slowly surrenders the hope of perception by another, he pauses after nearly every word, straining to hear some confirmation of Clov's presence. He disposes of the possessions tying him to others, even the stuffed dog that once acted as an artificial substitution for personal interaction. If it is possible for audiences to pity a tyrant, the sentiment is provoked by the interruption in habit and subsequent loss of

perception of the outside world that Hamm is suffering. The audience is further implicated as the whistle is thrown at them, a physical protest of the pain of isolation. Whether Hamm dies or is simply lying there with the handkerchief covering his face, he believes that he is not being perceived by another person. Cut off from this exchange, Hamm surrenders; the hopelessness and futility of the play turns to tragedy.

Similar to the debilitating effect blindness has on Hamm's ability to form relationships with others is Pozzo's reaction to his loss of sight in *Waiting for Godot.* Here, the physical dependence on others is more pronounced than in *Endgame.* While Hamm clearly relies on Clov for the incidentals of everyday life, the most significant function of their relationship is the companionship that it provides. This is not true of Pozzo's relationship with Lucky. Verbal communication allows Hamm to confirm his existence through conversation with Clov, whereas Pozzo is left in solitude as a result of Lucky remaining mute for the entirety of the second act of the play. His only hope for human interaction is Vladimir and Estragon, who are able to engage him verbally even though they do so with a certain amount of reluctance.

The difference between the characters' situations can be explained by the dynamics between the blind and the seeing characters in the plays. *Endgame* alludes to a shared personal history in which Hamm plays the role of a father figure to his servant, Clov. This is a possible explanation for the nature of their interactions. They have been having the same conversations for years because they have been trapped in the same space under the same conditions for a

seemingly interminable amount of time. Although they never admit it, they act as if they have feelings of obligation toward one another, which justifies, at least in part, their inability to abandon their arrangement. Hamm exerts his power over Clov, but at least on an unconscious level there is a certain amount of a mutual bond.

This does not appear to be the case between Pozzo and Lucky. Although Pozzo reminisces about what he seems to be a healthy master-servant relationship gone sour, the interplay between characters is practically nonexistent. This is even more pronounced in the second act after the loss of Pozzo's sight. Lucky's inability (or refusal) to speak renders him incapable of helping Pozzo with even basic tasks. When they enter in Act Two, Lucky stops short and Pozzo, unable to sense his movements, bumps into him, leaving them both "helpless among the scattered baggage" (*Godot,* 87). This is tragedy with a vaudevillian flair: isolated from the world, unable to communicate with anyone, the once-powerful Pozzo is reduced to thrashing about on the ground with his servant.

Because Lucky is incapable of breaching the problem of interacting with Pozzo through sound, as Clov does with Hamm, it is up to Vladimir and Estragon to come to his rescue. Since they have only minimal ties to the man, they debate whether to offer their assistance, first "[i]n anticipation of some tangible return," as Vladimir suggests, and finally as an apparent form of distraction from the endless waiting for the absent Godot (*Godot,* 90). The lack of obligation between

the relatively capable Vladimir and Estragon and the sightless Pozzo is even the subject of a discussion:

> Pozzo: …but are you friends?
>
> Estragon: (*laughing noisily*). He wants to know if we are friends!
>
> Vladimir: No, he means friends of his.
>
> Estragon: Well?
>
> Vladimir: We've proved we are, by helping him. […]
>
> Pozzo: You are not highwaymen?
>
> Estragon: Highwaymen! Do we look like highwaymen?
>
> Vladimir: Damn it can't you see the man is blind!
>
> Estragon: Damn it so he is. (*Pause.*) So he says.
>
> Pozzo: Don't leave me! (*Godot,* 97).

This exchange shows Pozzo straining to be perceived and, more urgently, to be helped by two other human beings. He is attempting to gain some sort of understanding about their relationship, relying on their verbal exchange since he is unable to assess the situation visually. There is the sense that his interjections are intended to break into the back-and-forth dialogue of Vladimir and Estragon as a means of attracting their attention. After all, if they continue to ignore him in favor of their banter, he is left sightless with only the help of his ineffectual mute servant, struggling on the ground. He does not even succeed in establishing a connection with the men. In the end, he is so desperate for some form of assistance and human contact that he begs Vladimir and Estragon to stay, even though they never deny the possibility that they could be highwaymen. This

need to be perceived by others is so strong that Pozzo is reduced to pleading with men who could potentially harm him.

In the end, the necessity of leaving suddenly seizes Pozzo. His demeanor has quickly progressed from helpless to pompous, almost as if the satisfaction of his immediate needs has shaken him and caused his return to an attitude similar to that he possessed in Act One. Suddenly, the situation is reversed:

Vladimir: Don't go yet.

Pozzo: I'm going.

Vladimir: What do you do when you fall far from help?

Pozzo: We wait till we can get up. Then we go on. On!

(*Godot,* 102)

Pozzo seems to compensate for the debasement of his pride by lashing out at the men. He allies himself with Lucky, signified through his use of the pronoun "we." Ironically, Vladimir understands that the exit of Pozzo will mean the end of another means of distracting themselves from the never-ending boredom that he and Estragon battle throughout the play. As Pozzo needs the acknowledgement of the two men, they need him as another form of human interaction to accentuate the static nature of their lives. To a lesser degree, the men need one another for companionship in the same manner that Hamm and Clov rely on one another to break the monotonous decline of their own situation.

Restriction and Isolation in *Company*

Where Pozzo must cope with Lucky's inability to answer him in *Godot*, the narrator of the prose text *Company* must survive in an undetermined space in

limited lighting with only a voice that may or may not be speaking to him. Here, the restriction is not only visual, but physical and vocal as well. These limitations explain the confusion of the man "on his back in the dark" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.427). In this manner, Beckett explores the nature of our undeniable need for others. As the man obsesses over the nature of the voice (its origins, whether it is speaking to him or to another, etc.) and listens to stories from an unspecified person's past, he is searching for something to break his painful, monotonous solitude.

This endless obsession over the source and subject of the voice imbues the work with a repetition that seems tantamount to madness. The rehashing of theory upon theory builds as the narrative goes on, giving the reader the impression of what it is like to be alone, motionless, in darkness and to have these thoughts running on loop through his or her mind. The man considers that the voice never directly references him "for no other reason than to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty and embarrassment" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.428). This gnawing suspicion has tortured the man, who cannot determine whether or not he is being perceived by another being. The result is a discomfort that becomes a form of paranoia, as he conjectures malicious motives that the owner of the voice has.

In his ruminations, the man thinks about the very nature of company, deciding, "The voice alone is company but not enough" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.428). To the man experiencing this unique form of torture, the voice is company in the sense that it is a distraction of sorts, something to contemplate

as he is restricted to an unchanging, unresponsive world. However, it is not enough to merely hear the voice; he yearns to know more information about it. In a more naturalistic setting, this would be the equivalent of knowing about one's companions, as Pozzo does in questioning Vladimir and Estragon. Assuming that the voice is the product of another human, the man in *Company* tries to ascribe source and motive as a way of contextualizing the only other being that he is certain exists.

For these same reasons, the man assigns and reassigns names to the entities that he believes to be present in his environment, beginning with himself. In the language of a mathematical equation, the man initiates the naming process: "Let the hearer be named H… And let him know his name. No longer any question of his overhearing. Of his not being meant" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.437). In identifying himself, the man hopes to reaffirm his own existence. Names are, by nature, intended to be used by others to refer to the self. In giving himself a name, H, by which others can identify him, especially in the provable logic of mathematical language, he is trying to eliminate the doubt that plagues him in the dark. Ironically, he decides to do away with the name, unable to cope with the loss of the little sentiment he does feel. Hopelessly isolated, even his emotions serve as a form of company, as a distraction from the harsh nothingness that surrounds him.

The narrative continues in anonymity until "feeling the need for company again" the man decides to call himself M and the possible man also on his back in the dark whom he imagines the voice may be addressing, W (*Grove*

Centenary, v.4 p.442). Rather than using the action of naming as a way to convince himself that he is the one being perceived by the voice, he effectively confirms his existence by naming himself and the possible other as inversions of the same being, to be identified by inversions of the same letter. He blurs the line between self and other, even as he abandons the naming process once more: “His unnamability. Even M must go. So W reminds himself of his creature as so far created. W? But W too is creature. Figment” (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.443). The exploration of self and other, the establishment of identity, and the attempt to establish some stable sense of surrounding are all impossible to the man lying on his back in the dark. All becomes a thought exercise, much in the tradition of the verbal exercises that the characters in *Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot* employ to while away the time of desperate waiting in a declining closed system.

The lack of vision in *Company* operates to occlude the establishment of a stable sense of identity. After all, if the man was able to see properly, he would not have to torment himself with thoughts of another person to whom the voice is speaking; it would immediately either be confirmed or denied. There is also the possibility that he would discover the source of the voice, or that he would be able to determine whether or not he was being perceived. In his article “Who speaks? Grammar, Memory, and Identity in Beckett’s *Company*,” Justin Beplate points out, “The uncertainty at the heart of *Company* arises from the difficulty in reconciling the different narrative voices” (Beplate, 160). The frustration felt by the man is shared by the reader, who also takes part in his confusion and the

psychic pain that comes from the possibility of not being perceived by another human being.

In his infinite isolation, it is possible that the man himself could be the source of the voice. It is specified several times that the voice never uses the first person. The man's logic is that "were the voice speaking not to him but to another then it must be of that other it is speaking and not of him or of another still. Since it speaks in the second person" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.429). While this follows a coherent line of thinking, the language he uses is somewhat convoluted. It sounds like the wandering thoughts of a man who is in a desperate situation, which has the effect of implicating the reader in the interplay of the speaking voice and the anonymous memories and the paranoid musings. One possibility is that the man is the "Devised diviser devising it all for company" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.443). He could be both the source of the voice and the hearer, the man on his back in the dark and the mysterious "other" whose existence he questions. This makes sense in light of his naming himself forms of the same letter. The memories recited by the voice could be his own, fragments of distraction from another life unconsciously recalled to ease the emptiness. Since he cannot interact with other humans and is lacking that crucial perception of others, his perception of himself becomes fractured. The result is the splitting of the self in the manner of one with a psychological disorder, creating multiple personalities in order to simulate a company of sorts.

Metatheater and Audience Implication

Beckett often implicates the audience in his plays. Beckettian director Michael Beresford-Plummer recounts his experience as a member of the audience for a 1986 performance of *Rockaby*:

> As a spectator my privileged position of voyeur shifted to that of witness and then became finally dislodged as I felt myself moved into the site of the performance text. My Eye on the performance was interchangeable with my I in the performance. (Beresford-Plummer, 71)

To Beresford-Plummer, the ideal experience in viewing Beckett's plays is to become a part of them. This communal relationship between the world of the stage and the world of the audience is often directly written into the script. Theater is performed to be observed by the audience; in return, characters in the plays themselves often reference the spectators who would perceive them.

Beckett employs a form of metatheater in which he engages the audience in two ways: by acknowledging its presence and by alluding to its position as an empty space. The former occurs in *Endgame*, when Clov observes the audience through his telescope and describes, "I see… a multitude… in transports… of joy" (*Endgame*, 29). This gives the sense that the characters are aware of being observed and adds an element of theatricality to their actions. Conversely, in *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir references the audience in his description of the setting: "All the same… that tree… (turning toward the auditorium) that bog…" (*Godot*, 9). Anna McMullen illuminates such moments in her article "Performing Vision(s): Perspectives on Spectatorship in Beckett's Theatre," explaining, "While

the audience's actual position in the auditorium is alluded to, they are simultaneously displaced by their textual reflection" (McMullen, 141). The result is a blurring of the boundary between audience and player, making the action of the play more powerful. This adds another layer to the dynamics of identity in the play: the characters are simultaneously perceiving themselves, seeking recognition from other characters, and implicating the audience in its role of observing them onstage.

Splitting the Self

The function of the audience as perceiving the action of the script takes on a new twist in Beckett's *Film*. Here, the camera becomes the perceptual Eye (E), pursuing its Object (O): the self. *Film* is Beckett's ultimate testament to the inevitability of self-perception; it is impossible for O to evade the scrutiny of E, even as they are revealed to be one and the same. Here, perception is portrayed as being uncomfortable, but inescapable. In the beginning of *Film*, E scrutinizes a couple and a woman carrying a tray of flowers, all of whom return its gaze with an expression the script describes as "corresponding to an agony of perceivedness" (*Grove Centenary,* v.3, p.373). The characters in question are reacting to the unsettling experience of facing such unabashed observation. Beckett seems to be reflecting on what little notice individuals take of one another, and the "agony" that can arise from such unfamiliar close interactions with others.

While E perceives the others, O seems to be too busy avoiding observation to acknowledge them. His focus is on eliminating anything that could

elicit “the agony of perceivedness,” such as animals, mirrors, and the accusing eyes on a poster of what the script describes as God the Father (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.375). He examines photographs depicting his life, and destroys them, clearly haunted by his past. As he drifts off to sleep and lets his guard down, he is finally confronted by E; unable to avoid himself forever, he comes face-to-face with his own perceptions of himself.

Beckett introduces his script with an epigram from Bishop Berkeley, “Esse est percipi” (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.371). The use of this maxim, “To be is to be perceived,” is problematic: as Vincent J. Murphy points out, Beckett seems to use this concept as a starting point from which he diverges from Berkeley’s philosophy. According to Murphy, “[W]hile for Beckett, ‘To be is to perceive oneself,’ for Berkeley, ultimately, ‘To be is to be perceived by God’” (Murphy, 45). Indeed, the self does replace God in *Film*. As Murphy points out, E visually replaces the space occupied by the portrait of God the Father when coming face-to-face with O.

Shame and Perception in Beckett’s Later Works

In his later works, Beckett presents an internal struggle between the “I,” representing the internal, essential self, and the “me,” which is an external manifestation of the self that becomes a form of the other. Characters grapple with the issue of establishing a sense of self, often failing and finding themselves in a state of debilitation, incapable of functioning normally. This separation between subject and object indicates the difficulty in connecting the internal “I” with the external “me.” When we try to develop a sense of identity, we

immediately externalize the “I” into a form of “me,” a comprehensible entity separate from the elusive self that remains indefinable. This distinction suggests both an unwillingness and an incapability to perceive the self due to shame sparked by perception of oneself that echoes the experience of being perceived by others.

In the prose work *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett presents a detached voice in an indeterminate setting struggling to arrive at a unified sense of self. He begins Text 4 searchingly demanding, “[W]ho says this, saying it’s me? ...It’s the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours” (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.306). The question and subsequent answer suggest the voice’s failure to place the self and, by extension, his existence as a whole. Here, the “I” regards the “me” as an “old stranger,” an ironic characterization that denotes both familiarity and an enduring alienation. The “I” and the “me” are inextricable, even in their mutual exclusivity. The grammatical separation of the two later elides, and the voice recognizes a first person plural shared interest in being in the face of the void; the “me” requires the “I” to confirm its existence.

Although the “I” appears to acknowledge the necessity of the “me,” it also expresses anxiety that stems from both the split itself and the resulting struggle between the two parts. The “I” feels threatened and confused by the “me” who seems to have a better understanding of their relationship, and rants about his external counterpart: “[M]ad, mad, he’s mad. The truth is he’s looking for me to kill me, to have me dead like him, dead like the living. He knows all that, but it’s

no help knowing it, I don't know it, I know nothing" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.306). The "I" experiences the inevitable existence of the "me" as paranoia; there is a sense of desperation that stems from a lack of understanding. Beckett creates a contrast between the internal world of "I" and the external world of "me," which is characterized as dead. There is the sense that in externalizing anything, it becomes somehow deflated; separation from the internal world is tantamount to devaluation.

In a way, the resistance the internal "I" feels for the external world is a manifestation of the avoidance of the inevitable perception of the self. It is impossible to ignore the outside world, and by extension the awareness of the "other." The other half of the self has the same function as other beings in the world: that of judgment, or at least perceived judgment by the part of the self under its scrutiny. In Text 4, the voice goes on to drop the designation of "him" in the admission that "all these things, what things, all about me, I won't deny them any more, there's no sense in that any more" (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.307). Here, the "I" and the "me" converge, as the voice recognizes the futility of trying to hide from the outside world. His acknowledged denial suggests that his refusal to expose himself to the perception of the "other" is conscious, at least on some level. The hesitancy in revealing himself signifies the shame he feels when subjected to this sort of examination, even when it is conducted by the self.

The concept of shrinking away from self-perception as well as the perception of others resurfaces in *Film*. Beckett immediately establishes the inevitability of perception by the self in his general explanation in which he

claims, “All extraneous perception suppressed, animal, human, divine, self-perception maintains in being” (*Grove Centenary,* v.4 p.371). Here, Beckett allows for the escape from the perception of others and supplants it, at least temporarily, with perception on the part of the self. The self takes the form of E, or “eye,” and corresponds to the “I” in *Texts for Nothing.* In *Film*, Beckett focuses more on the function of the external “eye” than an analytical struggle with the internal “object,” which is the counterpart of the “I.” In this conception of the division of the self, E is completely external; O appears only aware of its existence as something to be avoided, not intellectualized as the “I” does in Text 4.

In *Film*, O’s feelings regarding E appear much less complex than those “I” harbors for “me.” In fact, being perceived by both the self and by others results in reactions “corresponding to an agony of perceivedness” (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.373). The anxiety that O feels does not necessarily take the form of the paranoia that “I” experiences in Text 4, just a tortured impulse to withdraw from the situation as he would feel regarding any outside source of scrutiny. The implication is that the entity being perceived instinctually feels threatened. Again, this is a result of the judgmental nature of perception. Such a thing as an impartial observer does not exist; sensing this, O, as well as the people he encounters on the street, experience the pain of being subjected to the perception and, by extension, the judgment of either another being or the self.

As discussed earlier, P.J. Murphy claims that the removal of the image of God the Father is equivalent to a replacement of God with the self, by which “E

becomes a kind of surrogate of God in a world which God no longer perceives" (Murphy, 47). This shift imbues the self with the power of judgment once reserved for the deity. While Beckett begins with Berkeley's assertion that "Esse est percipi," at this point it becomes apparent that to be is not necessarily to be perceived by God, but to be perceived by the self (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.371). The part of the self that is the "other" is now endowed with the authority to pass judgment on the essential self, not only as a mechanism of the psyche but also as an extension of the divine.

Unlike the incorporeal voice in *Texts for Nothing*, O in *Film* is given more of a personal history to provide an explanation of the repulsion he feels for E. After striving to rid the room of everything capable of perceiving, he reacts with great emotion to a set of photographs presumably depicting scenes from his life. We see him eliminating all external sources of perception of himself, only relaxing his guard when he believes himself to be alone. That he purposely attempts to isolate himself suggests a certain amount of self-awareness; he is consciously suppressing emotions that he wants to keep secret. He appears to experience some sort of guilt or pain about that past that results in a sense of shame, resulting in his continued avoidance of perception by E.

Where the self is visibly split in *Texts for Nothing* and *Film*, Mouth in *Not I* attempts to bury the self in a "vehement refusal to relinquish third person" (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.406). Beckett's note implies that Mouth understands that the self exists, but refuses to acknowledge it to the external world, here embodied in

Auditor. The role of "I" is encompassed by the consciousness that is speaking, but the external "me" is being emphatically suppressed.

The presence of first person pronouns in the monologue would be equivalent to admitting that the person of whom she speaks in, in fact, herself. Her occasional outbursts of "what? ...who? …no! …she!" suggest that she is actively avoiding recognizing her involvement in the story (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.406). Auditor provides an "other" perceiving Mouth, but its role is stunted by the restraint of Mouth. Each time Mouth fails to acknowledge herself as the first person protagonist of her monologue, Auditor reaches out in a "gesture of helpless compassion" until, at the end of the play, he or she fails to do so (*Grove Centenary,* v.3 p.406). This offers a comment on the nature of compassion, implying that although it might exist in others, it can only be constructive to the extent that it is accepted. Mouth's suppression of the "me" disables her relationship with Auditor, effectively preventing its help. Ironically, this offer of some form of empathy is the opposite of perception as judgment. However, submitting to this possibility of connection involves making the self vulnerable. Even the threat of exposing herself to the judgment of another is enough to cause the speaker to maintain her strict use of the impersonal third person.

As in *Film*, the "I" voice in *Not I* is given a background that explains, at least partially, her reluctance to succumb to the perception of the outside world. Where O's desire for isolation appears to come from the loss of an idealized past, Mouth ostensibly experiences her detachment as a product of the isolation that has characterized her life. Orphaned, abandoned, and "spared" love, Mouth

learned to separate herself from her experiences much in the manner of a trauma victim, resulting in a particular kind of division within the self. Rather than a reiteration of the hostility "I" feels toward "me" in Text 4, Beckett presents an "I" that refuses to even accept its role as the internal voice, instead pawning its history and thoughts on a nonexistent third party.

In *Frescoes of the Skull,* James Knowlson offers another interpretation of the first person in *Not I*: "Mouth's firm rejection of the 'I' may be seen as a fierce and deeply human judgment on the desolation and solitude of the barren life that she is forced to recount rather than being a mere restatement of it" (Knowlson, 199). In this analysis, the refusal of the first person is a conscious choice on the part of Mouth, a sort of protest against being a victim of her own story. However, it seems that she is only "forced" to relate her story to the extent that it operates as a self-preservation mechanism distracting her from the loneliness of her own life. It seems that this refusal of self-awareness is so entrenched that a purposeful decision about whether to continue to deny the first person seems outside of the grasp of Mouth. Her sense of shame is so deep that it is debilitating, resulting in a constant outpouring of a disjointed autobiography of which she can claim no part.

The detachment between the "I" and the "me" hint at deeper human frailties. While the split seems to be unavoidable, it is exacerbated by the indignities and tragedies that inevitably befall each of us. The result is that we feel an alienation from ourselves. Essentially, the self in the guise of the "me" becomes a form of the other, taking on the role of both perceiver and judge. The

external self becomes estranged as we wallow in our own shame, making the experience of being perceived, even by ourselves, one of agony.

Blindness and Shame

The issue of shame is also related to blindness. In his book *Must We Mean What We Say?*, Stanley Cavell explores the issue as it relates to *King Lear*, citing moments in the script where Gloucester and Lear realize their own injustices and recognize their children. Cavell comments, “Self-recognition is, phenomenologically, a form of insight; and it is because of its necessity in recognizing others that critics have felt it here” (Cavell, 274). In Beckett, we also find that characters must maintain a certain level of self-awareness before they are able to interact with others. We can call to mind Murphy, whose absorption in the self paradoxically causes a loss of self-consciousness and results in death, and Hamm’s assertion of himself as master in order to relate to Clov as servant. We can even consider the reverse of this in *Not I*, where Mouth refuses to claim ownership of her past and finds herself incapable of benefiting from the compassion of Auditor.

Cavell claims that it follows that Lear allows himself to be recognized by Gloucester because of his blindness: “Therefore one can be, can only be, *recognized by him without being seen,* without having to bear eyes upon oneself” (Cavell, 279). This theory of blindness suggests that it is a crutch of sorts, allowing sighted characters to interact with unsighted characters because it does not necessitate an excessive amount of self-perception. The implications of this are twofold. First, it reinforces the idea of the “agony of perceivedness.” It is

psychically painful to perceive the self; this is manifested in the characters' shame and consequent posturing of themselves as they would prefer to be seen. For example, this is why Pozzo sees himself as lord and master, Hamm insists on maintaining his dictatorship, and Mouth spews her story without claiming it as hers. Secondly, Cavell's theory explains why the blind are elevated to the level of prophet, a phenomenon earlier discussed in relation to Pozzo. Because they are incapable of seeing, they are incapable of judging. Characters lose their inhibitions as they are freed from the burden of being watched by another. By this reasoning, sighted perception is portrayed as more powerful and, by extension, more threatening.

Conclusion

In its most essential form, the issue of perception is one of alienation. In Beckett, the human experience is characterized by shame, which becomes the source of the division of the self. If we conceptualize this split as one between the "I," an intangible internal essence, and the "me," a more concrete external projection of the self, we can see the parallel between self-perception and perception by others. In perceiving the self, the "me" takes on the role of the other. This is especially true of works such as *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which Krapp's sole form of interaction is with himself, albeit at different ages, and *Not I*, in which Mouth refuses to even acknowledge the existence of the "I" in order to dissociate from her painful past. Similarly, we are threatened by perception by others because of a fear of judgment. We can see this in Hamm's misanthropy and Pozzo's superiority complex. Regardless of personality or history, Beckett

portrays the human experience as one of alienation, both from the self and from others.

And yet, as we must live in our world, Beckett's characters must live in theirs. As strong as they feel the pain of isolation and shame, Beckett's characters also experience the psychological need for human interaction. Under this rubric falls both perceiving the self and being perceived by others. As Cavell points out, without the former, the latter is impossible. Even if it is skewed, self-conception is necessary to interaction, which in turn is essential to existence. Not only physical but emotional necessities are at stake here; after all, even the narrator of *Company*, on his back in the dark, envisions dialogue and interaction with the other, regardless of whether it is in the form of an actual person or a division of his own mind.

In exploring what it means to be human, with human limitations, Beckett expresses the necessity of such perception through the senses. Most commonly, this interaction occurs through the physical structure of eyes, as characters connect through sight. When this capacity is limited, hearing becomes its surrogate, as characters communicate through speech and listening. In doing so, they attempt to bridge the divide between themselves and others who, by virtue of their shared humanity, are forced to suffer similar psychic pain. This is simultaneously escapist and cathartic, as they attempt to avoid the anguish of self-perception and search for something to make them whole and, in a sense, resolve the separation of the self. In Beckett's work, this struggle to mend the psyche is the source of tragedy as well as that of the hope, however

dim, that inspires his characters to continue to exist despite the cruelties and anxieties of the world.

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